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AUTHOR He, Zili
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ABSTRACT

The study of minority languages in the People's Republic of China, in the form of organized governmental research since the 1950s, has resulted in the recent publication of more than 50 descriptive grammars. Although some practical purposes of the study were achieved, such as the identification of ethnicity and orthographic design and reform, Chinese linguists were criticized during the Maoist period as being guided by Western bourgeois theories and methods. Such political interventions were detrimental in the past; however, things have gradually been changing for the better since the end of the Cultural Revolution. This paper introduces current research organizations and their major tasks. Most current studies on minority languages in China are carried out by specialists working at institutes for "nationalities," which is the English translation used in China for the notion of "ethnicity." Among the major tasks are the following: examining unstudied/unknown languages or dialects of minority languages; writing or revising descriptive grammars and dictionaries; studying minority language instruction and translation; studying ancient minority language writing systems; and studying mutual influences among languages, bilingualism, and pidginization. Contains 9 references. (LB)

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THE STUDY OF MINORITY LANGUAGES IN CHINA

Zili He

Abstract: The study of minority languages in the People's Republic of China, in the form of governmental organized research since the 1950s, has resulted in the recent publication of over fifty descriptive grammars. Some practical purposes of the study were the identification of ethnicity and orthographic design and reform. In the past, political interventions were detrimental. The current research organizations and their major tasks are introduced.

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I will begin by mentioning two papers published during the second decade of this century: Zhuang Qi, 1917, "Miaowen lüeshu" (A brief account of Miao) in The Eastern Miscellany 14.1-5, and Jun Shi, 1917, "Xizangyu zhi tezheng" (Some characteristics of Tibetan) in The Eastern Miscellany 14.93-8. Also there was Mao Kuenyi's paper entitled "Xianxing Zhongguo zhi yizuyu ji Zhongguo fangyan zhi fenlei" (The classification of current China's minority languages and Chinese dialects), published in 1925 in Folk Songs 89.2-6. In The Chinese Year Book of 1936-1937, Li Fanggui wrote the article "Languages and dialects", which laid the foundation for the genetic grouping of minority languages in China. Later, another influential work was done by Luo Changpei and Fu Maoji, "Guonei shaoshuminzu yuyanwenzi de gaikuang" (A survey of the minority languages and writings in China), which was published in 1954 in Zhongguo Yuwen (Chinese Languages and Linguistics) 3.21-6.

Between 1956 and 1958, organized by the Minority Languages Department of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Central Institute of Nationalities, seven investigation teams, consisting of over seven hundred researchers trained in phonetic transcription and grammatical analysis, conducted general surveys on forty-two minority languages in fifteen regions. The results of these investigations were:

a) a better knowledge of the dialectal differences within minority languages was gained, and certain decisions were made about such dialectal divisions;
b) raw data concerning the linguistic structures, affiliation, and mutual influences of minority languages was collected;

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c) for those minority groups who had the desire to invent writing systems for their languages, standard dialects and standard pronunciations were selected, and alphabetical writing systems were designed;
d) there was growth in the forces specializing in minority language research.

From 1959 to 1966, drafts of descriptive grammars of minority languages were prepared, discussed, revised, and readied for publication. Unfortunately, most of them had not been published when the cultural revolution broke out. It lasted for ten years, during which previous efforts were criticized as being guided by bourgeois ideas, and many of the manuscripts were lost. However, some linguists were still doing their underground work under the most extreme situations, and the study of minority languages was still making very slow progress. After the cultural revolution, since 1978, the surviving linguists took up their work again, revising, supplementing, and verifying their materials on the basis ofnew investigations. So far, about fifty descriptive grammars of minority languages have been published.

The contentsof descriptive grammars of China's minority languages usually include the following:
a) general information about the name(s) of the language; the ethnicity, historical background, geographical distribution, demography, cultural characteristics, and present state of its speakers; the dialectal variation of the language; the affiliation of the language; and the history of the study of the language;
b) the phonological system, including segmental and suprasegmental features, phonotactics, syllable structure, allophonic variations, and the phonology of dialectal differences and of loanwords;
c) the lexicon, including the basic vocabulary, cognates in related languages or dialects, dialectal differences in vocabulary, loanwords, and the morphology of the language;
d) the grammar, including word classes, the structure of phrases, sentence structure, sentence types, and the syntactic influences from other languages (basically from Chinese);
e) dialects, often with detailed and separate treatment of each major dialect;
f) the writing system of the language, if there is any;
g) a vocabulary list.

The objectives of the study of minority languages in China are always more practical than academic. The first two priorities are to serve the needs of the minority peoples, and to carry out the government's policies concerning minorities. These are, of course, political statements, which mean different things in different situations. To look at the positive side, one of the roles the study of minority languages plays is in the identification of ethnicity.

China is a multiethnic state with a long history of co-habitance and mutual influence among these ethnic groups. In the identification of a certain minority, there are usually three steps to be taken:

a) to determine whether the group is ethnically distinct from the Han majority;
b) to determine whether the group is a part of any already recognized minority, or whether it is truly discrete and independent;
c) to assign an independent status to the group as a distinct ethnic minority with an official name.

The linguistic variaties spoken by the members of the group is certainly considered one of the major criteria. Work is assigned to linguists to decide the status and affiliation of the language(s) spoken by the group, and to decide whether they are merely dialect(s) of some already classified language(s).

Linguistic evidence is not taken as the sole or the most reliable evidence. The Hui minority, for example, is identified on the basis of their Islamic religion and custom, although they are primarily speakers of Chinese dialects. One part of the Yugur minority speaks a language called Western Yugur, which belongs to the Turkic group of the Altaic family. The other part of the Yugur minority speaks a different language called Eastern Yugur, which belongs to the Mogolian group of the Altaic family. The two parts speaking two distinct languages still constitute the same ethnic minority -- Yugur. On the other hand, the same language may be spoken by several different minority groups, as in the case of the Zhuang language, which is also spoken by the Miao, Yao, and Maonan minorities. There is also the problem of drawing the line between language and dialect. Sometimes the dialectal difference is so great that linguists are hesitant about the acceptance of the existence of a single language.In the case of the Bouyei language, the differences between Bouyei and the northern dialect of Zhuang are smaller than those between the northern

and the southern dialects of Zhuang. However, due to the fact that Bouyei is recognized as a minority distinct from the Zhuang, the Bouyei language is regarded as a separate minority language in accordance with the desire of the people. It is argued that, although the characteristics of linguistic structures are of prime concern in distinguishing between language and dialect, the speakers' historical traditions and social development must also be given due consideration. The general principles of ethnicity identification is that a holistic approach is in order which takes into account the factors of language, history, geographical distribution, socio-economic life, and psychological nature. Historical documentations, archaeological findings, and vernacular folklore are to be consulted. Group members should be interviewed concerning their own feelings of ethnic identity. Furthermore, the work of ethnic identification is considered necessary for national unity and for the economical and cultural developments of the minorities. Thus, we can see that the study of minority languages plays a necessary, though not a decisive, part in the identification of ethnicity in China.

Another practical use to which the study of minority languages is put is orthographic design and reform. During the general surveys of minority languages in the 1950s, proposals were made regarding dialectal divisions, the selection of a dialect as the base of the standard written form of the language, and the determination of the standard pronunciation, to those minority groups who had the desire to develop writing systems for their languages. Designs for writing systems using the Latin alphabet were created subsequently for Zhuang, Bouyei, Miao, Dong, Hani, Lisu, Va, Li, Naxi, and Yi languages. Orthographic reforms were carried out in Uygur, and Kazak from the use of the Arabic alphabet to the use of the Latin alphabet, and also in Jingpo and Lahu within the Latin alphabetic system. Reform proposals were made to the Dai minority who had used four writing systems earlier. There have been twists and turns in orthographic design and reform. Some writing systems which were designed were not put to use in practice. Some uses of these writing systems were choked when the political slogan "Great Leap Foreward" was in vogue -- linguistically, it meant that minorities were making great achievements in mastering the Chinese language and writing.

It is true that the learning and using of Chinese language and writing provide the minorities with powerful instruments to participate in the economic and

cultural constructions of the whole country, especially in higher education. On the other hand, minorities in China have thousands of years of ethnic traditions, and still have very solid internal social and family ties. Most spoken minority languages are being used and passed on from generation to generation. Why is it necessary to creat and/or reform their writing systems? The main motivations on the part of the government are, as I see it, political and pragmatic. First of all, minorities have deep feelings for their own languages and writings, which are directly related to their ethnic identity and pride. If the right to their languages is fully respected, and if the written form of their languages can be created, preserved, or improved, this will greatly enhance their positivism and patriotism. Thus, the government's general policy towards minority languages is that the spoken and written languages of the ethnic minorities are to be respected, and that all ethnic minorities have the right to use and develop their languages. As a more moderate goal, the development and use of a writing system will help raise the level of literacy, and promote the economy and culture of the minorities on a local basis. The government also encourages the mutual learning and using of languages and scripts among different ethnic groups, with the purpose of achieving unity and cooperation.

As has been mentioned above, the study of minority languages in China serves certain political purposes as well as academic ones. At times, political intervention can be rather detrimental. From the Great Leap Forward to the end of the Cultural Revolution, minority language studies were criticized. Charges were that the distinctions between minority languages were exaggerated, that certain dialectal differences were augmented into language differences, and that minority languages were isolated, petrified, and mystified. All these, as the criticisms went, were against the spirit of national unity, and against the Marxist dogma of national fusion and extinction of ethnic differences. Academically, Chinese linguists were criticized as being guided by western bourgeois theories and methods. For example, the tracing of family trees in genetic classification placed too much emphasis on divergence, discrepancy, and past history, while ignoring convergence, similarity, and developmental tendency. Another major criticism was that comparative and historical study focused primarily on linguistic facts without giving enough consideration to the (political) history of the people. Although things have gradually been changing for the

better since the end of the Cultural Revolution, it is still the strongest desire of the Chinese intellectuals to have full academic freedom in their study and research, independent of any political fluctuations.

At present, most of the studies and research on minority languages in China are carried out by specialists working at institutes for nationalities, and at official committees for nationality affairs. (The term "nationality" is the official English translation which is used in China for the notion of "ethnicity"). There are nine institutes for nationalities: Central, Yunnan, Northwestern, Southwestern, South-central, Guizhou, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Qinghai. Committees for nationality affairs exist in both the Central Government and all the provincial governments. There is also the Institute of Nationality Studies in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the nonofficial Society of Chinese Minority Languages, which play an active part in organizing academic conferences and publishing study and research results. The major publishers are the central and several local Minzu Chubanshe (Publishing House of Minority Nationalities). Three major journals are published by the Institute of Nationality Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences: Minzu Yuwen (Linguistics and Philology of National Minorities of China), Minzu Yanjiu (Studies in Nationalities), and Minzu Yichong (Translated Works on Chinese Minority Languages by Foreign Authors). Other journals and magazines which carry information or papers on minority language study include Zhongguo Yuwen (Chinese Languages and Linguistics), Minzu Huabao (Nationality Pictorial), and Minzu Tuanjie (Unity of Nationalities). Papers on the subject can also be found in various journals published by language departments of universities.

As summarized by Wang Jun (1981:6) in an article entitled "Some ideas to be discussed on the work of national minority languages", the major tasks of the Chinese linguists at the present stage include the following:

a) the investigation of unstudied/unknown languages, and of the major dialects of minority languages;
b) the study of minority language standardization, e.g., standard pronunciation, standard orthography, and new-word formation;
c) the writing or revision of descriptive grammars and dictionaries, and their publication;
d) the study of minority language instruction and translation;

e) the specific studies of problems of phonology, morphology, and syntax of minority languages;
f) historical and comparative study, and the study of genetic relationships of minority languages;
g) the study of ancient minority language writing systems, if any existed
h) the study of the mutual influences among languages, bilingualism and pidginization;
i) the standard spellings of minority language place names.

Recently, people have become interested in typological study and electronic data processing.

The study of minority languages in China benefits from the abundance of dialectal materials and ancient written records. There are two important aspects in which Chinese linguists would like to concentrate their efforts: the exploration of Chinese in the light of the comparison of Chinese with the other minority languages in China, and the study of linguistic relationships between minority languages spoken in China and languages spoken outside of China.

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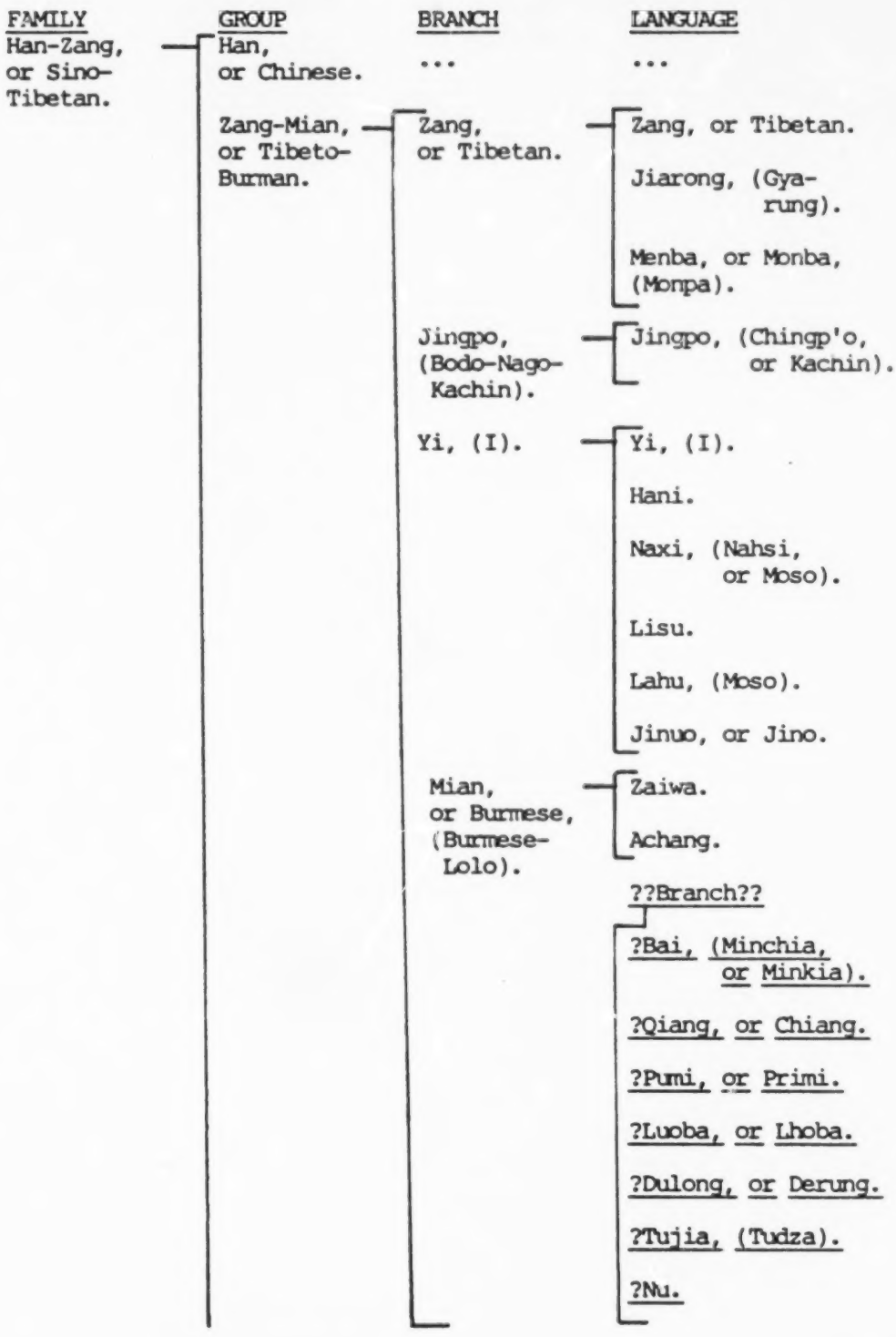
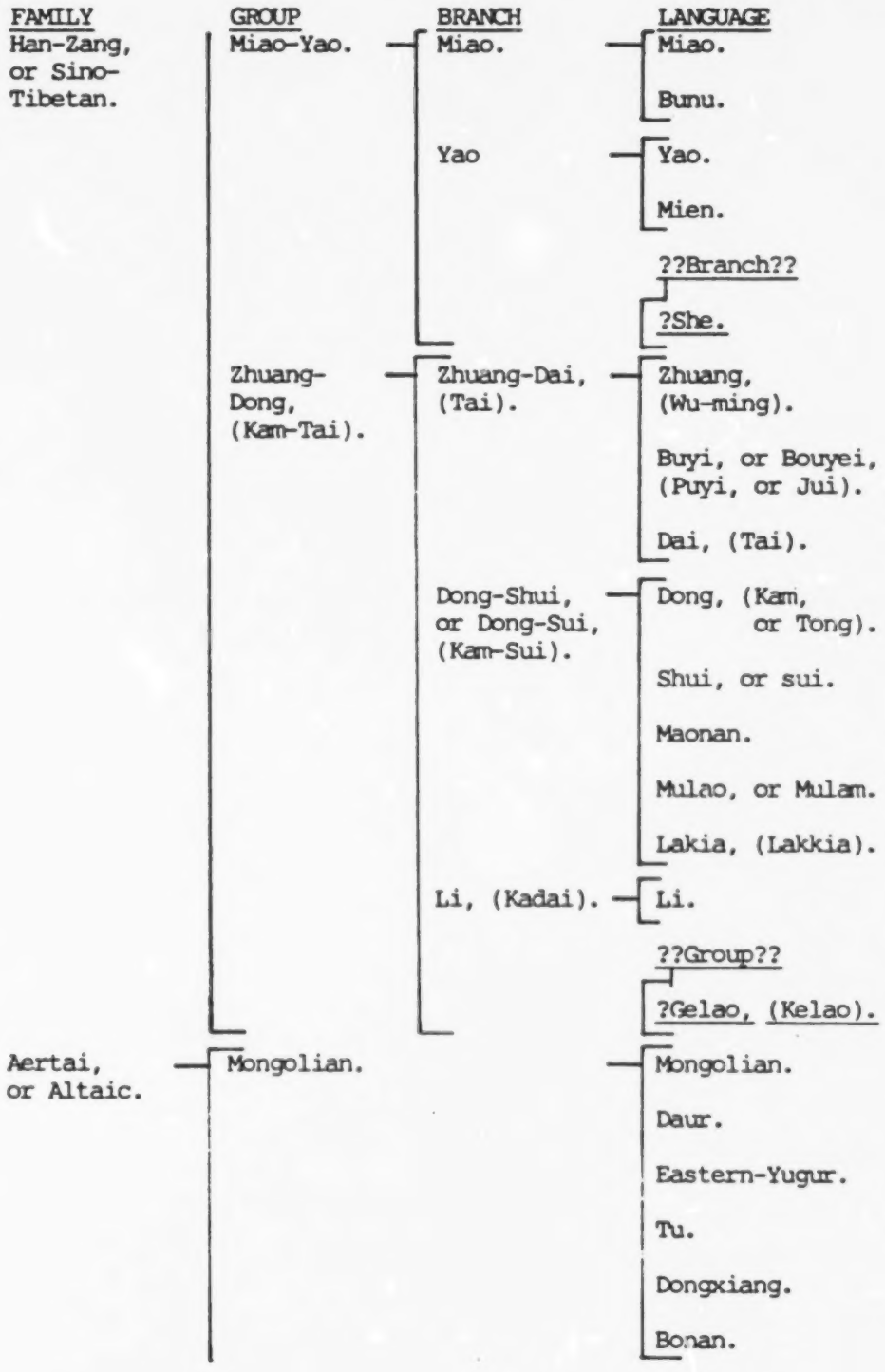
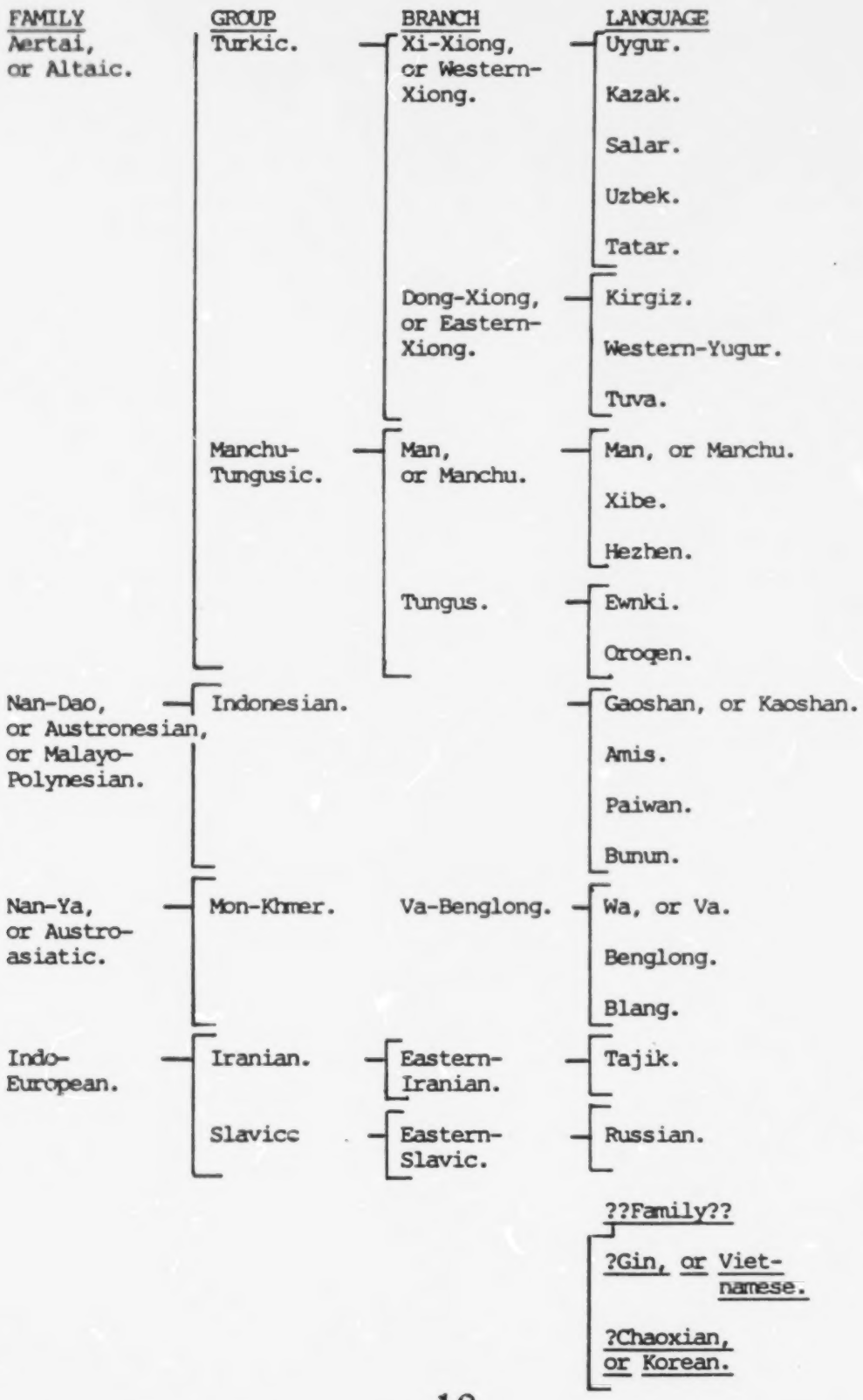
APPENDIX:

THE GROUPING OF MINORITY LANGUAGES IN CHINA

Names of languages used by linguists in China are not placed between parentheses, with Pin-yin first. Those used only in Western literature so far are placed between parentheses.


FAMILY
GROUP
BRANCH
LANGUAGE
Han-Zang, or Sino-Tibetan.
Han, or Chinese.
...
...
Zang-Mian, or Tibeto-Burman.
Zang, or Tibetan.
Zang, or Tibetan.
Jiarong, (Gya-rung).
Menba, or Monba, (Monpa).
Jingpo, (Bodo-Nago-Kachin).
Jingpo, (Chingp'o, or Kachin).
Yi, (I).
Yi, (I).
Hani.
Naxi, (Nahsi, or Moso).
Lisu.
Lahu, (Moso).
Jinuo, or Jino.
Mian, or Burmese, (Burmese-Lolo).
Zaiwa.
Achang.
??Branch??
?Bai, (Minchia, or Minkia).
?Qiang, or Chiang.
?Pumi, or Primi.
?Luoba, or Lhoba.
?Dulong, or Derung.
?Tujia, (Tudza).
?Nu.


FAMILY
GROUP
BRANCH
LANGUAGE
Han-Zang, or Sino-Tibetan.
Miao-Yao.
Miao.
Miao.
Bunu.
Yao
Yao.
Mien.
??Branch??
?She.
Zhuang-Dong, (Kam-Tai).
Zhuang-Dai, (Tai).
Zhuang, (Wu-ming).
Buyi, or Bouyei, (Puyi, or Jui).
Dai, (Tai).
Dong-Shui, or Dong-Sui, (Kam-Sui).
Dong, (Kam, or Tong).
Shui, or sui.
Maonan.
Mulao, or Mulam.
Lakia, (Lakkia).
Li, (Kadai).
Li.
??Group??
?Gelao, (Kelao).
Aertai, or Altaic.
Mongolian.
Mongolian.
Daur.
Eastern-Yugur.
Tu.
Dongxiang.
Bonan.


FAMILY
GROUP
BRANCH
LANGUAGE
Aertai, or Altaic.
Turkic.
Xi-Xiong, or Western-Xiong.
Uygur.
Kazak.
Salar.
Uzbek.
Tatar.
Dong-Xiong, or Eastern-Xiong.
Kirgiz.
Western-Yugur.
Tuva.
Manchu-Tungusic.
Man, or Manchu.
Man, or Manchu.
Xibe.
Hezhen.
Tungus.
Ewnki.
Oroqen.
Nan-Dao, or Austronesian, or Malayo-Polynesian.
Indonesian.
Gaoshan, or Kaoshan.
Amis.
Paiwan.
Bunun.
Nan-Ya, or Austro-asiatic.
Mon-Khmer.
Va-Benglong.
Wa, or Va.
Benglong.
Blang.
Indo-European.
Iranian.
Eastern-Iranian.
Tajik.
Slavicc
Eastern-Slavic.
Russian.
??Family??
?Gin, or Viet-namese.
?Chaoxian, or Korean.